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Lexi Schell

To Wait, To Hope, To Expect

Tan libre como un ave. “As free as a bird” is a common expression used to illustrate someone without restraint who does as they please. Unfortunately, in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House On Mango Street*, Esperanza’s wings have been clipped by social injustices. The integration of similes within this novel aids readers in understanding complex topics by presenting them through a simpler, more innocent lens. Readers sympathize with Esperanza by learning not only what challenges she endures, but how they make her feel. She perceives her desirability as a reflection of self worth, and envies her friends’ indifference towards objectification. Her language paints the idea that uniformity equates to beauty, and consequently, she suffers embarrassment as an outsider. Esperanza longs for the confidence of a man to renounce these cultural prejudices; she pities herself for the shame that society has cast upon her. Esperanza’s pining for freedom divulges her struggles with objectification, masculinity, and conformity, controversial topics supported by figurative language in the context of a childlike narrative.

Esperanza’s gender shackles her aspirations for freedom because she associates masculinity with respect and power. She aches for justice but inhibits herself by allowing gender stereotypes to oppress her, doubting that she’ll ever be as “fast as the boys” (Cisneros 96). This simile represents the societal tendency to constantly compare oneself to others, resulting in deficient confidence and self doubt. Additionally, stereotypical gender roles instilled during childhood games mirror cultural inequities. Males run fastest, are dominant, and make the rules. To combat this inequity, Esperanza begins her “own quiet war. [She is] one who leaves the table

like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (Cisneros 89). Cisneros utilizes this analogous language to demonstrate masculine mimicry, revealing that men are formidably perceived, and Esperanza believes women are responsible for cleaning up their messes. Her internal conflict is compared to a quiet war because she is fighting the patriarchy, but also wanting to be a part of it.

Conflict arises as Esperanza straddles the threshold between masculinity and femininity, desiring both the power of a man and the sexuality of a woman. Her desire for a successful career and a house of her own are put aside as the temptations of adolescence prevail over practicality, showing a change in priorities with age. This tendency is a derivative of peer pressure and her transformation into womanhood. Her dynamic shift in values reveal how male and female conventionalisms are so dichotomous that she can never find satisfaction in just one. Readers sympathize with her as she pines for "a boy around [her] neck and the wind under [her] skirt" (Cisneros 73). This natural lust for attention is enhanced by figurative language to remind readers of Esperanza's youth, which is easily obscured by the adult-like conflicts she combats. Her desire to be wanted and held is a by-product of her unsettled feelings, and would satisfy the comfort and confidence she is searching for. As a blossoming adolescent, Esperanza craves being "all new and shiny" (Cisneros 73) because she associates beauty with power; a woman's sexual prowess can often be used to gain control, which makes sense for Esperanza who feels detained by societal judgements.

The impact of exposure to gender roles during childhood is stressed through an innocent narrative. Esperanza identifies with “Rafaela [who] leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” (Cisneros 79), as she wishes for traditionally attractive

features. Orthodox beauty, and therefore sexual power, impose unrealistic expectations upon Esperanza that burden her into adolescence. Her discomfort in her own skin highlight her struggles with conformity. Although Esperanza may not be able to distinguish the root of her insecurities during childhood, Cisneros' inclusion of Rapunzel indicates that certain features are more desirable than others. This concept is ingrained into young children through the weight of gender stereotypes. In revealing that she wishes to be more like a man or a white princess, readers understand how Esperanza's ethnicity and gender affect her on a daily basis.

Cisneros' similes reveal how cultural mismatch makes Esperanza feel ostracized and diminishes her self confidence. She confides, "I felt stupid... they all looked at me as if *I* was the one that was crazy and made me feel ashamed" (Cisneros 97) when she tries to protect a friend from the naughty, immature boys. Esperanza's casting to the outskirts of society oppresses her into complacency, convincing her that it is where she belongs. Accordingly, the center of attention seems unfamiliar and daunting. She compares a seemingly innocuous game of double dutch to "two arcs open wide like jaws" (Cisneros 51) ready to bite her the moment she steps out of her place as a rope holder. This simile represents the challenges of being Latino in the realm of American Nationalism. Cultural adversities arise for Esperanza because she looks different from the traditional American girl; consequently, she is treated as an intruder. She internalizes this difference, and rather than feeling proud of her diversity, embarrassment burns her. A peer jeers at Esperanza, "you are like the Cream of Wheat cereal. You're like the lumps" (Cisneros 37). This simile reduces the idea of ethnocentricity into easily digestible terms, packing an even more powerful punch; Esperanza then recognizes that despite her efforts to assimilate, she will always struggle with blending in.

Liminality also hinders Esperanza's ability to form meaningful interactions because boys and girls have distinctly different relationships in public and private. She grapples with finding a sense of belonging because she is expected to behave so differently in various social contexts. She describes herself as "a balloon tied to an anchor" (Cisneros 9), grasping for freedom, but held down by her lack of identity. Her figurative language intimately portrays how isolated and stuck this absence of belonging makes her feel. Latino heritage is disrespected at school, and American customs are not welcome in her home; therefore, she can't fully invest herself into either. Mispronunciations of her name "as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (Cisneros 11) insult her dignity and bruise her self respect. Cisneros' depiction of self-doubt through similes reinforces the discomfort Esperanza's heritage causes her. How can a young girl feel empowered by her cultural diversity when it obstructs her right to freedom?

In regards to freedom, the American dream breaks its promise of equality by extending its opportunities only to those who qualify as traditionally intelligent in a Western context as a result of ethnocentrism. Societal expectations determine that in order to be considered intelligent one must have common sense for the culture they are in. Esperanza's mother, who is rich with knowledge of the arts and bilingualism, "doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown" (Cisneros 91). Because she struggles to navigate seemingly simple American customs, she convinces herself that she is not intelligent. Men reinforce this idea by demoting females to baby makers and bakers, leaving them no time to pursue American educations. Esperanza abnegates these social injustices declaring, "I want to be like the waves on the sea, like the clouds in the wind, but I'm me. One day I'll jump out of my skin. I'll shake the sky like a hundred violins" (Cisneros 60). Through these similes, she articulates that although the

American dream excludes her, she wants to live without restraint. The complexity of discrimination is softened by similes and the youthful vantage point. Furthermore, the scarcity of opportunities for Latinos explicates how fraudulent the American dream is; Esperanza becomes ashamed of her identity because of the cultural obstructions she faces. She dreams of soaring above this discrimination, but her wings are not strong enough to surmount male dominance, objectification, and ethnocentrism.

Integrating figurative language into Sandra Cisneros' *The House On Mango Street* explicates not only the obstacles Esperanza faces, but how they affect her. This novel is narrated through the eyes of a child, alluding that controversial topics make an impression on all age groups. Challenges that afflict the youth often persist into adulthood, and Cisneros' use of similes helps readers understand controversial topics by presenting them through a comparative voice. Esperanza confesses that friendships are hard to come by because her socioeconomic status depreciates her self worth. Such vulnerability urges her to depend on men, and her desirability becomes another qualifier of self worth, blurring the line between internal and external beauty. Languishing in embarrassment as an outsider, Esperanza yearns for a sense of security and the confidence to rise above cultural prejudices and inequities.

Works Cited

Cisernos, Sandra. *The House On Mango Street*. Vintage Books. 2009.